Benefits of Internal vs. External Evaluation for County-Based Tobacco Control

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Introduction

An important component of statewide tobacco control programs is the network of local health departments, community-based organizations and other local agencies that carry out tobacco control objectives under the leadership of the state agency. These local programs can be responsive to community needs, and they have the capacity to pursue strategic objectives that reflect the current status of tobacco control efforts in a state's cities, suburbs, and rural communities.

The emphasis on locally responsive programming will naturally result in a wide variety of aims and approaches being developed across different regions of a state. Furthermore, multiple local agencies that identify similar tobacco control objectives and that use similar approaches may still differ sharply in the overall level of compliance or acceptance that they target for those objectives, due to the pre-existing differences among the communities being served.

These differing dimensions of variability constitute an important strength for any statewide effort, but they also create challenges for attempts to provide a structure for program evaluation activities, which will be necessary to answer questions related to the operation, effectiveness, and efficiency of the programs. A substantial degree of decision-making authority should be delegated to the local agencies for planning and conducting these evaluations, so that the evaluations can be sensitive to the projects' local aims and activities. However, the issue of quality control in local evaluation must be addressed as well, to ensure that the evaluations are suitably rigorous and provide useful information. Therefore the overseeing state agency must pursue a complex balance in setting the evaluation guidelines and requirements for its local grantee agencies.

This paper focuses on one factor related to local program evaluation planning, namely the way that the local grantee agencies build the evaluation activity into their organizational structure. In particular, we examine whether the agencies contract externally to fulfill their program evaluation responsibilities or use their own staff members to conduct these activities. The distinction between *external* and *internal* evaluation is well-known in the evaluation literature (e.g., Love, 1991; Patton, 1997), and a number of important considerations have been identified. However, the topic has not been addressed specifically for the case of tobacco control. In addressing this issue, we use the case of the California Tobacco Control Program.

The California Tobacco Control Program

The California program was established following the passage in 1988 of the California Tobacco Tax and Health Promotion Act (Proposition 99), which created a tax on cigarette products and resulted in the creation of a comprehensive statewide tobacco control program (Tobacco Control Section, 2005). Under this statewide program, community-based program activities are planned and implemented by 61 local health departments (in 58 counties and three cities), which are known as *local lead agencies*.

The local lead agencies (LLAs) have always been required to evaluate their program activities in accordance with Tobacco Control Section (TCS) guidelines, but the TCS requirements have evolved over the years (Tang et al., 2002). In 2004, TCS established the California Tobacco Control Evaluation Center, based at the University of California, Davis, to provide evaluation-related technical assistance to the LLAs. The Evaluation Center is charged with providing consultations, conducting workshops and trainings, developing evaluation tools,

reviewing evaluation plans, and providing other forms of assistance that can support the LLAs' evaluation efforts. However, the Evaluation Center's technical assistance activities do not alter the LLAs' responsibility for evaluation of their own programs. Each LLA must designate a proportion of its overall budget for evaluation, and it is free to determine whether it will use these funds to contract with external evaluation professionals or to support its own agency staff with time and materials to implement the evaluation activities.

The Current Study

In discussions with personnel at both the TCS and the LLAs in various counties, the staff at the Evaluation Center determined that the internal-external dimension was an important organizational feature of the LLAs' evaluation activity. Therefore, we designed the current study with several purposes in mind: to understand the structure of these funded projects, to learn about their current evaluation capacity, and to assess their level of satisfaction with their evaluation approach. As a long term goal, the Evaluation Center also aims to use this information to help the LLAs build their overall evaluation capacity. Our specific research questions were the following:

1) How are projects structured to accommodate an internal vs. external evaluator relationship?
2) What are the resource issues associated with internal vs. external evaluators?
3) What are the relative advantages and disadvantages for using internal vs. external evaluators?
4) What recommendations can be made for other local agencies when deciding upon an evaluation approach?

Methods

First phase: Identification

As an initial step, all 61 LLAs funded by TCS were contacted by phone to determine the evaluation approach they use for their tobacco control projects. From these contacts, four basic categories of evaluation arrangement were identified, as follows:

Internal evaluation: An individual within the LLA's tobacco control project is charged with completing 100% of the required evaluation activities.

External evaluation: The LLA contracts with an individual external to its project for 100% of the required evaluation activities

Combination: The LLA uses a combination of internal agency staff and individuals under external contract to complete the required evaluation activities. The proportion of responsibility assigned to internal vs. external individuals varies across agencies.

Other: The LLA uses an evaluator who is outside of the tobacco project but within the larger health agency.

It should be noted that the *external evaluation* category does not preclude time being spent by the LLA's Project Director (its lead administrator) to oversee the evaluation component of the project or to manage the contract with the external evaluator. We consider these activities to be a normal part of the oversight responsibility of the Project Director, rather than internal evaluation as we define that term above.

Overall, we obtained information from 59 of the 61 total LLAs (97%), and the breakdown of evaluation arrangement was as follows:

- Internal: 11
- External: 8
- Combination: 34
- Other: 6

Second phase: Addressing the research questions

Following the initial identification of the agency arrangements, we identified a purposeful sample of 16 LLAs for an in-depth telephone interview that addressed the research questions above. The selection of LLAs was made to balance several factors, including the evaluation relationship (as described above), the geographical location within California, and the size of the county served by the LLA. Of the 16 LLAs that we invited to participate, we were able to complete interviews with 13. Our final interview sample consisted of 4 LLAs using internal evaluation, 3 LLAs using external evaluation, and 6 LLAs using a combination. Five of the 13 LLAs were located in counties we designated as large (in population) and eight were located in counties designated as small.

In each telephone interview, a member of the Evaluation Center staff spoke with the LLA's Project Director. The interviews lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. The interview questions included a combination of closed-ended ratings and open-ended questions. The closed-ended items had respondents rate their satisfaction with their project's evaluator on the following factors: (1) Expertise in evaluation methods, (2) Expertise in issues of tobacco control, (3) Expertise in the specific tobacco control issues of the LLA's program. In addition, the Project Directors rated their overall satisfaction with their LLA's current evaluation arrangement. The open-ended questions addressed a variety of areas including: (1) Allocation of evaluation responsibilities, (2) What is working well in the arrangement, (3) What does not seem to be working well, and (4) Lessons learned that might benefit other projects.

Results

Adjusting the Internal-External Designation

As noted above, we had originally identified evaluation arrangements based on LLA responses into categories that we designated as *internal*, *external*, and *combination*. (LLAs classified as *other* are excluded from this discussion because they were not selected for our interview sample.) However, in our in-depth discussions with Project Directors, we found that no counties were purely external in their arrangements. In actual practice, internal staff was involved at a minimum level of about 10-15%, even for projects that had originally claimed to contract out for all evaluation work. The internal staff activities went beyond project leadership or contract management, and involved data collection and other specific collaborative tasks. Therefore, in the analysis of the interview responses we collapsed the two prior categories of *external* and *combination* into a single category that we designated as *external*.

Satisfaction

Overall, Project Directors reported being satisfied with their agency's evaluation approach (whether internal or external) and the expertise of their evaluator in the categories described above (evaluation methods, general tobacco control, and the LLA's specific tobacco

control activities). As highlighted in Table 1, the satisfaction ratings were lower for projects using an internal (compared to external) evaluation approach. In particular, we did not expect the very high ratings for satisfaction with external evaluators' general expertise in tobacco control. Also notable is the high level of ratings provided for external evaluators' expertise in the LLA's specific tobacco control project. One possible explanation is that some LLAs experience fairly high staff turnover, so that the staff person designated as the evaluator may be relatively new to the project.

Table 1
Project Directors' mean ratings of satisfaction with their evaluator, broken down by type of evaluation arrangement

Participant rating of satisfaction with:	Internal	External	TOTAL
Evaluator's expertise in evaluation methods	4.00 (n=4)	4.78 (n=9)	4.54 (n=13)
Evaluator's expertise in general issues of tobacco control	4.25 (n=4)	5.00 (n=9)	4.77 (n=13)
Evaluator's expertise in the LLA's specific tobacco control activities	4.25 (n=4)	4.78 (n=9)	4.62 (n=13)
The LLA's overall evaluation approach	4.00 (n=4)	4.39 (n=9)	4.27 (n=13)

Response options ranged from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

Research Questions

Question 1: How are projects structured to accommodate an internal vs. external evaluator relationship?

LLAs with internal evaluators and those with external evaluators were similar in the patterns they reported for assigning tasks. Indeed, under both arrangements, one or more individuals were designated to the role of "evaluator" and other individuals were designated as "project staff". Tasks tended to be divided as follows:
- *Evaluation planning and instrument selection (or instrument development)* were often conducted collaboratively between the evaluator and the Project Director or other project staff, although for some projects almost all of these tasks were carried out by the evaluator.
- *Data collection* was almost exclusively conducted by project staff, even in projects that otherwise relied heavily on their evaluator to conduct other evaluation activities.
- *Data analysis and report writing* were generally conducted by the evaluator (whether internal or external), even when this individual was involved in no other activities.

Question 2: What are the resource issues associated with internal vs. external evaluators?

Similar resource issues were reported by projects using internal and external evaluators. The three main resource issues described were *money*, *staff (or time)* and *expertise*. Regardless of the type of evaluation approach, LLAs reported similar resource issues, but they differed in

the reasons why they considered their particular approach to be most cost-effective. The reasons they reported were as follows:

Internal
- Less expensive because (a) the salary range is lower, or (b) overhead and/or other expenses are paid by other projects.
- Better timeliness because the Project Director has control over the evaluator's schedule.
- Internal evaluation expertise is available on staff.

External
- Less expensive because the evaluator is part-time (and the project does not have to hire someone specifically for evaluation.
- Better use of time because the evaluation does not take staff away from program activities.
- Evaluation expertise is not available internally.

Question 3: What are the relative advantages and disadvantages for using internal vs. external evaluators?

Advantages identified by projects in both evaluation categories
The following advantages are related to having an experienced evaluator, whether internal or external to the project**:**
- The evaluator can work with project staff and build their evaluation capacity.
- The evaluator can provide links to other projects in the community.
- An evaluator with expertise gives them more flexibility to do various kinds of evaluation, beyond what is required by the funding agency.

Advantages specific to the internal approach
- Increased accessibility and communication
   - "There is a common language."
   - Ongoing conversation about the plan and activities (lessens the need to schedule formal meetings).
   - Immediate technical assistance can be provided because the evaluator is on-site.
- Internal evaluator is more integrated into the process and the team
   - Evaluation plans are more realistic.

Advantages specific to the external approach
- External evaluators provide a more objective view of the project.
   - They can collect some data that project staff could not collect without questions of bias being raised.
   - They increase the credibility of the findings.
   - They can look at the project with a "fresh eye."
- Having an external evaluator can help keep staff and evaluator roles well-defined.

- Having a combination of internal and external personnel creates a good mix of evaluation expertise and practical knowledge.
- External evaluators can link multiple LLAs if they work across county lines, or can draw lessons from the previous experiences with other LLAs.

Disadvantages specific to the internal approach
- With more than one role in the project, it may be difficult at times for an on-staff evaluator to give the appropriate time and attention to either role.
- The evaluation is vulnerable to a perception of bias when it comes from an internal source.

Disadvantages specific to the external approach
- External evaluators do not always understand implementation issues and may create evaluation plans that are not realistic.
- Communication and accessibility can be difficult with an external evaluator.
  - The external evaluator has competing priorities, and is not always responsive to the LLA's schedule.
  - The external evaluator may live outside of the community or county, making communication and accessibility difficult.
- Good external evaluators are not readily available in some counties.
- The procurement process to get an external evaluator can be difficult.
- External evaluators can be expensive.
- External evaluators do not necessarily have background knowledge (beyond their evaluation expertise) that can be important for understanding tobacco control; specific types of knowledge mentioned included tobacco control, public health, or required procedures of the Tobacco Control Section.

Question 4: What recommendations can be made for other local agencies when deciding upon an evaluation approach?

General recommendations
- The evaluation must be a team effort, and must include the involvement of the Project Director. Don't simply delegate all of the responsibility for the evaluation to the designated evaluator.
- Involve the evaluator in the planning process, which will:
  - help the evaluator understand the project.
  - help the staff understand the evaluation.
- Consider staff capacity for evaluation and related activities.
- Keep the evaluation plans realistic.
- Be clear about how the evaluation will be used. The Project Director should insist on getting the evaluation that is most needed, rather than the one the evaluator might be most interested in doing.
- Find an evaluator who can be flexible, and who can accommodate changes to the evaluation plan as the project is implemented.

- If you have a particularly innovative idea, it may be worth allocating more resources to implement it and understand its implications.

Recommendations when using an internal evaluator
- Protect the staff time for the evaluation.
   - An evaluator who is involved with other projects in the department can be pulled in different directions.
   - Make sure to have buy-in and support from LLA decision-makers, to protect the staff time needed for the evaluation.
- See if you can find an evaluator internal to the county's public health system but external to the project.
- A lot of evaluation tasks can be done by internal staff; consider staff capacity.

Recommendations when hiring an external evaluator
- Make sure the roles of the internal staff and external evaluator are clear.
- Maintain frequent communication and a good working relationship.
- Stay focused on the project's Scope of Work, and monitor the progress of the evaluation with this focus in mind.
- The evaluator should be familiar with the local project environment and the larger tobacco control context.
- Hire someone with strong evaluation expertise.
- When deciding the mix of external and internal responsibilities, consider the capacity of the project staff.

Conclusion

Although our sample was limited, by only interviewing a small number of projects throughout the state, key considerations emerged repeatedly in these interviews. The specific capacity of internal staff was one of the main drivers of the decision to use an external or an internal evaluator. Both LLAs with internal evaluators and LLAs with external evaluators raised the issue of the evaluator's accessibility and ability to focus on the project's evaluation requirements, without being distracted by other tasks.

Larger implications of these cross-cutting issues include (1) the value of increasing the evaluation capacity of staff in order to increase the choices available to Project Directors, (2) the importance of having a communication plan in place if the evaluator is not immediately accessible, and (3) the importance of making evaluation a team effort, through early and regular communication and the integration of various team members.

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